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New Economy Demands Business-School Partnerships for Lasting Economic Success

If you take a look around, you will quickly see this is not the same world it was 50 years ago – or even just five years ago. Today's economy and jobs have evolved significantly due to the technological advances of our age.

As a former educator, and now vice-chair of the Senate Education Committee, I can tell you we also must change our education system to meet the demands of the new economy.

Many graduates will pursue some form of post-high school training through a community college or a four-year university. However, some young people may become disenchanted with the typical high school curriculum. They yearn for more immediate reinforcement in terms of gaining practical work/study skills leading to immediate employment upon graduation.

John Engler, our former governor, who currently heads the National Association of Manufacturers, recently said, "Not everybody has to go to college. Everybody has to have skills, but they certainly don't need to all go to college." Gov. Engler recognizes two important truths: not everyone needs or wants to go to college and not every job requires a college degree – what is important to many new economy jobs is skills.

Right now, here in Oakland County, our schools are on the cutting edge of this idea, and are meeting with great success. Novi High School and Huron Valley Schools are co-world champions of the FIRST Robotics competition. FIRST Robotics is a multinational competition that teams professionals and young people to solve an engineering design problem in an intense and competitive way. Students work to master technical skills like drafting, mathematics, problem solving, and writing. And much like athletes, students also develop their social skills – such as cooperation and teamwork.

This is the type of program where every young person can be involved; and there are many ways to engage young people who otherwise feel left out of opportunities that meet their interests and talents.

While many of the solutions to our state's economic problems will take time to create and implement, engaging our students in skill-driven activities like the FIRST Robotics competition can be done now. Urban, rural and inner city schools all are involved and achieving amazing results for students.

As another way of addressing our economic and jobs situation, I also am a supporter of technical high schools. These schools can provide the skills and training required of many new economy jobs, equipping students to obtain a good-paying job right out of high school. Other states and countries have implemented technical high schools with great success.

There is no doubt – our world is changing and we must change how we educate to ensure that Michigan can continue to compete with other states.

Certainly attending advanced training, or a two- or four-year college should remain a valued asset on an education continuum. However, both the FIRST Robotics competition and technical high schools are successful models for partnering schools with the business community to achieve positive results.

The real excitement and benefits stem from engaging the business community with our high school students as mentors and advisors.

In summary, we have always recognized the academic mantra of diversity – diversity in talents, interests and aptitudes. Only by offering a continuum of opportunities tapping diversity and directly involving the business sector will Michigan achieve lasting economic success.

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